DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 337 839 CS 507 619

AUTHOR Larson, Charles U.
TITLE The Impact of Fantasy Theme Methodology on the Study of Political Communication.
PUB DATE Apr 91
NOTE 21p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Central States Communication Association (Chicago, IL, April 11-14, 1991).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120) -- Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Audience Awareness; Communication (Thought Transfer); *Communication Research; Higher Education; *Mass Media; Persuasive Discourse; *Political Campaigns; *Research Methodology; *Thematic Approach
IDENTIFIERS *Fantasy Theme Analysis; *Political Communication; Symbolic Convergence Theory of Communication

ABSTRACT

In 1972 Ernest Bormann and his students were in the process of developing and applying what was later called "fantasy theme analysis" to various kinds of communication including the political campaign communication of 1972. Fantasy theme methodology ultimately developed into "Symbolic Convergence Theory," which has generated a wide variety and impressive quantity of research since 1972. Numerous conference papers, articles, and books using the methodology to explain various aspects of political communication have appeared. These applications of the theory have had impact on at least four levels of the study of political communication: (1) the redefinition of political invention and style; (2) a focusing on the consumer and co-creator of political messages; (3) an understanding of the role of mass media journalism in promoting themes which chain out; and (4) the legitimation of studying short political messages, especially in investigation of non-discursive message elements. (Seventeen notes are included.) (RS)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED337839

The Impact of Fantasy Theme Methodology on the Study of Political Communication

by

Charles U. Larson (Northern Illinois University)

(A paper read at the C.S.S.C. Conference, Chicago, 1991)

CS507619

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Charles Larson
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
☑ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Introduction

In the Summer of 1972, I was invited to the University of Minnesotaas as a visiting professor. In addition to teaching my assigned classes, I also attended several graduate seminars, among them Professor Ernest Bormann's seminar on the campaign of 1972. Bormann had become interested in the work of Robert F. Bales on small groups and particularly on Bales' "Dramatizes" category (previously labeled as tension release). Bormann was not only "testing" Bales' category on the communication in classroom groups; he was also trying to determine the degree to which it applied to communication in groups of politicians/staffs, journalists, and voters who were involved the primary elections and nominating conventions in 1972. Additionally, Bormann and his students were in the process of developing and applying what was later to be called "Fantasy Theme Analysis" to a variety of kinds of communication including the campaign communication of 1972. As we all know, fantasy theme methodology ultimately developed into "Symbolic Convergence Theory."1. The theory has generated a wide variety and impressive quantity of research in the nearly 20 years since I was privileged to be among the first of the "turtle racers" as the group became

1

known. People like Linda Putnam, John Cragan, Bill Semlak, Don Shields, Virginia Kidd, Jim Klummp, and others were trying to apply fantasy theme methodology in a variety of contexts. They were probing how Symbolic Convergence could help explain not only small group behavior but organizational communication, mass movements, public address, foreign policy issues, political personas, and popular advice magazines, etc.

Inasmuch as I had been among the founders of the Political Communciation Division of the International Communicatin Association two years earlier in 1970, my interests in the theory naturally turned to its use in the study of political communication. Since that summer of 1972, numerous conference papers, articles and books using the methodology to explain various aspects of political communication have appeared. These applications of the theory have been of great use in the study of political communication in at least four major ways:

1. Fantasy theme theory has brought about a major reinterpretation of the canons of <u>invention</u> and <u>elecutio</u> as they are used when considering political communication (e.g., speeches, press releases, television spots, etc.) as well as audience processing of such communication.

2. The methodology has focused attention on the role of the consumer of political communication--in other words voters who become active participants in their own persuasion.

3. The methodology has helped explain the role of the mass media in causing particular political messages to catch up and sustain public consciousness while other equally valid messages never spread to the electorate. This explanation applies not only to the *content* of mediated campaign messages but to the process of message development within groups of campaign staffers, journalists, and voters.

4. Finally, the methodology has forced communication critics to attend to non-discursive elements in political messages--visual communication, the "grammar" of televisual political communication, and non-verbal messages to name a few.

Let us now turn to these four major effects of fantasy theme methodology and Symbolic Convergence theory.

Political "Inventio" and "Elecutio"

Inventio Our field has traditionally looked at the process of invention as being an individual task--the speaker searches his or her personal knowledge and experience regarding the issue and is urged to consult other sources--usually documentary in nature. After sifting the available evidence and potential arguments that might be fashioned from it, the speaker selects that which seems most persuasive, substantive, and consonant with the speaker's own view of reality. However, when we use the fantasy theme perspective, all of that changes. Now the political communication researcher must explore how group processes develop communication aimed at creating symbolic convergence, and further how various audiences (e.g., the

press, loyal supporters, uncommitted voters, and the opposing camp to name a few) process and perhaps add to the message. Political invention is thus a group, not an individual process. This re-interpretation fits perfectly not only with our knowledge of political ghost writing, but with various criticisms of the power of the press to intensify certain statements by candidates while downplaying others and giving new meanings to yet others via editorial interpretation. A fantasy approach to political invention also helps the critic follow the discovery and elaboration of the campaign theme as various images, examples, or turns of phrase (e.g., F.D.R.'s "New Deal," J.F.K.'s "New Frontier" Mondale's "Where's the Beef?" or Reagan's "New Day in America) catch on and chain out as press, opposition, and voters respond to the emerging and growing campaign theme. Thus, fantasy theme methodology transforms political invention from an individual and static activity to a multi-participatory and dynamic process.

Elecutio We have most frequently viewed style as the major factor in political eloquence and the kinds of variables focused on by communication scholars have included things like unique statement of arguments, figures of speech, and linguistic embellishments among others. The most frequently used methodology for studying political eloquence prior to

the 1960s was Neo-Aristotlean, and the most frequently examined kind of political communication was the public speech. Then in the late 1960s, both the methods of analysis and the nature of the political communication to be studied broadened.

Largely because of the dramatic communication observed in social movements such as the anti-war and civil rights movements, the study of political "elecutio" moved beyond the "gold standard" of political communication--the public speech or the candidate debate--to other forms of communication. Some researchers started to explore political communication as it occurred in the "packaging" of candidates, giving particular notice to the effects of mass media technology on the "eloquent package." Shorter messages such as television ads began to attract contdroversial popular, if not scholarly, concern. Other researchers looked at the campaign as a kind of mass movement, using dramaturgical methods, Toulmin models, content analysis and other methodologies. There was however, there still remained great resistance to the study of anything shorter than a public speech or debates, and little was done with non-discursive variables--especially those involved with video technology until the late 70s. In fact, in the early 70's I prepared a manuscript focusing on

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

"Media Metaphors" as demonstrated in several short political campaign television advertisements. It was rejected by two subsequent editors of The Quarterly Journal of Speech because it did not focus on an extended or "significant" piece of discourse.

Bormann's groundbreaking article in the December, 1972 issue of the Quarterly Journal of Speech presented political communication scholars with an alternative research methodology--fantasy theme/rhetorical vision analysis.2 Shortly thereafter, his April, 1973 article on the Eagleton affair demonstrated the analytical power of the method especially in texts that were not public speeches or debates.3 Bormann's analysis revealed the power to spark fantasy themeing in single dramatic statements, language choices (e.g., "I am behind him 1,000 percent"), non-verbal communication (e.g., Eagleton's facial expression during his denial of Jack Anderson's charges of drunkenness as well as the camera work used to focus on Eagleton's face), and political television spots (e.g. the "Weathervane" spot put out by Demcrats for Nixon which Bormann speculated was the single most persuasive message in the campaign).

Taken together, those two aticles began and legitimated the redefinition of political "eloqutio" as something other than use of the ancient canon in a public speech setting.

Instead, political eloquence was re-defined as the artful development of reality and fantasy links that would "chain out" in small groups until, taken together, they led to a highly motivating rhetorical vision such as "Manifest Destiny," a "World Safe for Democracy," a "New Frontier" or a "New Day in America." Presently, political eloquence may be most effective if packaged in dramatic twenty second "sound bites" that are likely to chain out in the electorate. Candidates and their staffs must stylize their communication with what will be both ear and eye-catching. Eloquence also includes the candidate's persona and various elements of media technology (e.g., the languages of camera angle and movement, video graphics, etc.). Kathleen Hall Jamieson's recent book Eloquence in an Electronic Age is perhaps the best example of how far we have traveled in identifying what is legitimate grist for the mills of rhetorical criticism.4 By 1981, when I re-wrote and re-submitted my media metaphors article, it was published. By 1982, political television spots were considered fair game and as legitimate texts to be criticised as demonstrating political eloquence.5 So one major impact of the work of Bormann and his students has been the broadening our definition of political invention and political

eloquence which subsequently extended our research focus to include shorter and non-public speech texts.

Focus on the Consumer of Political Communication

A second area of impact due to Bormann's work is the focus on the audience or the consumer of political communication. Since the fantasy theme must "chain out" in the audience in order for a rhetorical vision to develop, the audience is inherently a co-creator of political and other messages. Noted media practitioner Tony Schwartz, (author of the famous anti-Goldwater commercial that featured a little girl plucking petals off a daisy and a mushroom cloud) calls this process of cooperation between source and receiver "Partipulation" or participation in one's own manipulation and his Resonance Theory reflects this renewed focus on the audience as well as the chaining process.6

Again Bormann's early articles paved the way for this re-focusing. His work prompted critics to go beyond simply assuming that meanings were in people not words, and therefore the ultimate effects of political communication were to be judged by political outcomes--election, legislation, court rulings, etc. Instead, Bormann's example shifted critical focus to the manifest content of the messages that chained out and the visions which

ultimately resulted--here was where the motivations of both source and the receiver conjoined. The message contains the umbilical links between them and reflects a co-created and dynamically shifting shared political reality.

Again, this new direction generated much research--this time on the audience participation phenomenon. Consider just some of the books and articles that reflect this focus on audience participation in the creation of social reality--Kidd explored the audience's evaluation of popular women's magazines;7 Cragan and Shields let the audience "write" the perfect foreign policy speech,8 Rarick and his colleagues explored audience perceptions of the 1976 Carter "Persona" and how those perceptions related to acual voting behavior,9 Sharf looked at audience perceptions of psychiatrists during the Hinkley trial,10 and most recently Nimmo and Combs' second edition of Mediated Political Realities a central concept of which is audience co-creation of political reality.11 Consider the impact of fantasy theory implied in the titles for chapters or parts of Nimmo and Combs' discussion--"TV News in Fantasyland," "Docudrama Fantasies," "The Political Fantasies of Hollywood," "Fantasies of the Arena: Popular Sports and Politics," and "Designed Political Experience in the Age of Fantasy" to name a few. So a second impact of Bormann's work on

fantasy theme methodology has been a new focus on the audience as co-creator of its own persuasion.

The Role of the Mass Media in Political Communication

A third impact of fantasy theme methodology has been on the analysis of the role the mass media plays in political communication. While Critics have always maintained that the mass media, especially in its gatekeeping role, has shaped what the electorate perceives as important, not until Joe Mcginniss' book Selling of the President: 1968, was there significant public concern over this shaping role. One Look at the bibliography of Jamieson's recent book, Packaging the Presidency: A History and Criticism of Presidential Campaign Advertising demonstrates how far we have come in this regard.13

One element of Bormann's theory was the focus on the group behavior(s) of members of the mass media covering political communication. Perhaps because journalists are frequently assigned to "beats" during the campaign, they are inevitably thrown into groups where they compare notes, trade information, and reflect with one another over the progress of the campaign. In essence, together they create a social reality of the campaign which is then dispersed to the electorate thus shaping the perception of the campaign. This shaping takes place not only in the gatekeeping

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

involved in selecting specific news stories to be aired but in the selection of particular phrases, figures of speech, and images to be featured on the evening news or in the morning newspapaer. This creation and propagation of a social reality developed by groups of journalists and has been labeled "Pack Journalism" in such books as Hunter Thompson's Fear and Loathing on the Campaign Trail and Timothey Crouse's The Boys on the Bus.

Bormann's article on the Eagleton affair demonstrated this power of the mass media as a purveyor of the raw material of fantasy themes. He quotes an good example of this power as reflected in Howard K. Smith's commentary on McGovern following the removal of Eagleton. Smith's comments probably lasted 20 seconds or less, and yet, intentionally or unintentionally, his words and images helped to spark and/or sustain the "McGovern Can't Govern" fantasy which was so devastating to the McGovern candidacy. Smith said,

> "McGovern, 1000 percent resolved to keep Eagleton, in his phrase, turned to marshmellow and let his national chairwoman tell the public, Eagleton had to go. (McGovern was) . . . .sullied by too much yeilding to pressure. His 1000 dollar welfare plan went the way his 1000 percent support of Eagleton did."14

Nimmo and Combs' provide us with further insight on the power of the press to identify and cue fantasies in the electorate. They quote "an inside dopester of Washington

journalism" on the topic of campaign reporting. The dopester said:

> "We are the filters. . .and it is through our smudgy, hand-held prisms that voters meet the candidates and grow to love or hate them, trust them or distrust them. . . .We are the voters eyes and ears, and we are more than that, for, sometimes we perform a larger and some would say, more controversial function. We write the rules and we call the game."15

Fantasy theme methodology allows the political communication critic to identify the kind of social reality which is shaped by the media. By looking phrases, words or images that appear and re-appear in the reportage of the political event, the critic can identify fantasy themes (e.g. McGovern Can't Govern") that appear to be chaining out in the journalistic pack and can assess the degree to which those fantasies might chain out in the electorate. Past examples of such images would include, the frequent comparison of campaigns to sports events such as horse racing with its come from behind "dark horses", boxing with its knockout punches thrown in the late rounds, baseball with its grand slam hits and thrilling late innings. Familiar media-initiated fantasies that did chain would include the Eagleton affair, the "Siege mentality" in the White House during Watergate, the "Where's the Beef" charge against Gary Hart in 1984, and Ronald Reagan as the "Great Communicator" among others. So another impact of Bormann's work has been

to examine the effects of pack journalism on the ultimate vision of the political campaign that spins out in the public eye.

The Effects of Non-discursive Message Elements

A fourth impact of fantasy theme methodology on the study of political communication is that it permits and perhaps demands that the critic to attend to non-discursive message elements that go beyond the attention paid to matters of delivery in the earlier Neo-Aristotlean approach. One example of such a non-discursive message element would be the "rigging" of camera and audience geography at news conferences on the campaign trail. A familiar strategy has the goal of suggesting either a crowded or a near empty room for the news conference depending on the inclination of whoever is in charge. For example if the non-discursive message is to be "This campaign is building up steam." or "This dark horse is starting to close the gap," the conference planner will crowd the audience into the space between the candidate and the camera, thus giving the illusion that the room is packed. If the opposite purpose is intended, the camera "looks" over the candidate's back to reveal a thinly spread audience indicative of a campaign in its last gasps.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Sometimes the announcer's discursive script is written to match the non-discursive video and music or sound effects. For example, in the film " The Making of the President: 1968" the visual message shows a trimphant Robert Kennedy walking in a New York city parade after announcing for the presidency. He is waving to the cheering sidewalk crowds on both sides of him. The sound effects, however are dubbed in and non-discursive boos and catcalls which neatly fit with the point being made about the divided Democratic party. This juxtaposition is reinforced by the announcer who says, "Criticized by friend and foe alike, Robert Kennedy. . . ." The non-discursive boos and catcalls become reality links for the rapidly chaining theme of a divided party.

Sometimes props used in the ads are non-discursive messages in and of themselves. In an ad reminiscent of lthe famous Schwartz "Daisy" ad, a flashing red phone was used by the Mondale campaign to suggest that Gary Hart might be dangerous if elected president. As the phone continues to ring and blink non-discursively, the announcer says:

> "The most awesome, powerful responsibility in the world lies in the hand that picks up this phone. The idea of an unsure, unstready untested hand is really something to think abut. . .Vote as if the future of the world is at stake, because it is. Mondale: This president will know what he's doing. And that's the difference."16

Bormann recently provided an even more dramatic example regarding the 1988 campaign.17 A speech by a candidate was to be backdropped by a hot air balloon rising. The annnouncer would say something positive about the speech thus borrowing the "things are on the upswing" message suggested by the rising balloon. Events went awry at the last moment and the balloon rose shakily only to run out of hot air and begin to slowly sink, suggesting the opposite meaning. The announcer quickly altered his discursive message to fit with the visual image of the sinking balloon and informed the viewer that the campaign seemed to be running out of steam.

Other examples of non-discursive message elements prompting a fantasy theme to chain out could be cited, but the real point is that rapidly chaining fantasy themes focus on the "then and there" of an imagined dramatic event. This will inherently involve non-discursive and usually visual message elements as each member of the group or audience uses "the television of the mind" to give the message drama and detail. The themes which catch on and chain out to complete an ultimate rhetorical vision thrive on such non-discursive cues--messages which were left largely unevaluated by rhetorical critics prior to the

introduction of fantasy theme analysis to the study of political communication.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Bormann's Fantasy Theme Analysis and Symbolic Convergence Theory have had impact on at least four levels of the study of political communication. They are: the re-definition of political invention and style; a focussing on the consumer and co-creator of political messages; an understanding of the role of mass media journalism in promoting themes which chain out; and the legitimation of studying short political messages and especially in investigation of non-discursive message elements.

Endnotes

1. Ernest G. Bormann, The Force of Fantasy (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1985") See also Ernest G. Bormann, "Symbolic Convergence Theory of Communication: Applications and Implications for Teachers as Consultants." The Journal of Applied Communication Research. (Spring, 1982) pp/ 50 to 61 and Ernest G. Bormann, "Symbolic Convergence Theory: A Communication Formulation." Journal of Communication. (Autumn, 1985) pp. 128-138.
2. Ernest G. Bormann, "Fantasy and Rhetorical Vision: The Rhetorical Criticism of Social Reality." The Quarterly Journal of Speech. (December, 1972) pp. 396-407.
3. Ernest G. Bormann, "The Eagleton Affair: A Fantasy Theme Analysis." The Quarterly Journal of Speech. (April, 1973) pp. 143-159.
4. Kathleen Hall Jamieson, Eloquence in an Electronic Age: The Transformation of Political Speechmaking. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988)
5. Charles U. Larson, "Media Metaphors: Two Perspectives for the Rhetorical Criticism of TV Commercials." Central States Speech Journal. (Fall, 1982) pp. 543-546.
6. Tony Schwartz, "Media and Politics" (Videotape) Films for the Humanities, 1989.

7. Virginia Kidd, "Happily Ever After and Other Relationship Styles: Advise on Interpersonal Relations in Popluar Magazines, 1951-1973." The Quarterly Journal of Speech. (February, 1975) pp.31-39.

8. John Cragan and Donald Shields, "Foreign Policy Communication Dramas: How Mediated Rhetoric Played in Peoria in Campaign '76." The Quarterly Journal of Speech. (October, 1977) pp. 274-289.

9. David Rarick, et. al., "The Carter Persona: An Empirical Analysis of the Rhetorical Visions of Campaign '76.' The Quarterly Journal of Speech. (October, 1977) pp. 258-273.

10. Barbara F. Sharf. "Send in the Clowns: The Image of Psychiatry during the Hinkley Trial." Journal of Communication (Autumn, 1986) pp. 80-93.

11. Dan Nimmo and James E. Combs, Mediated Political Realities. (N.Y.: Longman and Sons, 1990).

12. Joe McGinniss, The Selling of the President: 1968. (New York: Trident Press, 1969).

13. Kathleen Hall Jamieson, Packaging the Presidency, A History and Criticism of Presidential Campaign Advertising. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984).

14. Bormann, "The Eagleton..." p. 149.

15. Nimmo and Combs, p. 168.

16. Jamieson, Packaging. . . p. xxi.

17. Ernest G. Bormann, "Media Fantasies of Campaign 1988" a paper delivered March 30, 1988 at Northern Illinois University.